

*Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009*

**Remarks to Military Personnel and Their Families at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage, Alaska**

*November 12, 2009*

*The President.* Hello, Elmendorf. Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Thank you. Please—thank you so much. Anybody who has a seat, go ahead and take a seat. [*Laughter*] I want to thank General Troy for the introduction and for his extraordinary service; to Colonel Mark Camerer and your outstanding local leaders for welcoming me here today. And I want to give a shout out to the United States Air Force Band of the Pacific.

I realize that your commander, General Atkins, couldn't be here. I'm told that he got called down to Hawaii. [*Laughter*] Now, that's a tough assignment. I know a little something about Hawaii—*shaka brah*, what's up? [*Laughter*] I grew up there, so I hope that he's getting as warm a welcome as I'm getting here.

I want to thank your senior enlisted leaders: Command Chief Master Sergeant Robert Moore, Chief Master Sergeant Tom Baker, and Command Sergeant Major David Turnbull. Give them a big round of applause. And please give some applause to all the airmen and soldiers up here. They look terrific.

It is wonderful to be here at one of America's great air bases. I have to tell you I'm also really excited because I had up until today visited 49 States, so this is officially my 50th State.

*Audience member.* We love you, Obama!

*The President.* I love you back. We also have a lot of folks from Fort Richardson. We've got folks from all across Alaskan Command—Air Force, Army, Navy, Coast Guard, United States Marines; Active, Guard, and Reserve. We have our allies and friends from the Canadian Armed Forces.

I see many spouses here today. And I want you to know you are the backbone of our military families, and we honor your service. And I'm thrilled to see the kids who are here today. Hey, guys, thank you. I know you're proud of your mom and dads, but we're all proud of you too.

You know, we're here in "America's Last Frontier." And most of you are far from home. And I know your service is made a little easier by your unbelievable neighbors. So we want to thank your local and State leaders, Lieutenant Governor Craig Campbell, all the people of Anchorage and Alaska for their incredible support.

And we're also joined today by a leader who is fighting for Alaska in Washington and for you and all our men and women in uniform as members of the Armed Services Committee and the Veterans Affairs Committee—Mark Begich is here; Senator Mark Begich is in the house. Stand up, Mark, so everybody can see you.

Now, today I'm on my way to Asia; my first visit there as President. The crews are out there refueling Air Force One. But I didn't want to just pass through, because this is also, as I said, my first visit to Alaska and my first visit to Elmendorf. And I couldn't come here without taking this opportunity to deliver a simple message, a message of thanks to you and your families.

Now, these have been days of tribute. Two days ago, we gathered at Fort Hood, and we honored 13 Americans taken from us: soldiers and caregivers, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. We grieved with families who have endured unimaginable loss. And we found inspiration in the wounded, their spirits unbowed, and in those who braved the bullets so that others might live.

Yesterday we gathered at Arlington National Cemetery to salute proud veterans who served on foreign fields long ago and wounded warriors from today. And as citizens of a grateful nation, we are humbled by such service.

Today we gather here at Elmendorf, and we see the same spirit. It's the same spirit that I saw in the outstanding airmen and soldiers I met with a few moments ago. It's the spirit that I see in all of you. It's your sense of service, answering your country's call, volunteering in a time of war knowing that you could be sent into harm's way. That's a sense of responsibility on your part, the belief that the blessings we cherish as Americans are not gifts that we take for granted, they are freedoms that are earned. And it's your sense of unity, coming from every corner of the country, from every color and every creed and every faith and every station, to take care of each other and to serve together and to succeed together, as Americans.

So I'm here to say to all of you, all of you who serve, all the families who are here: Of all the privileges I have as President, I have no greater honor than serving as your Commander in Chief. We have the finest fighting force the world has ever known. And it's because of you, because we've got the finest personnel in the world. That's our most precious resource.

And by being here, all of you are joining a long line of service at Elmendorf, from the liberation of Pacific islands during World War II through a long cold war. You embody that creed: "Faithful to a proud heritage, a tradition of honor, and a legacy of valor." And you uphold that legacy every day.

Twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year, you keep America's skies safe. So we salute the 3d Wing and the 11th Air Force. You project power across the Pacific, returning just recently from Guam—the 90th Fighter Squadron, the Dicemen, and the 525th Fighter Squadron, the Bulldogs, and all the maintenance troops who support them. Welcome home. And when disaster strikes, whether a typhoon in the Philippines or an earthquake in Samoa, you're there, delivering the relief that saved—saves lives. So thank you Firebirds.

Today we also send our thoughts and prayers to all those who at this very moment are serving on the frontlines. They are airmen from Elmendorf in every corner of the world. They're soldiers from Fort Richardson: military police in Iraq; the 4th Brigade Combat Team in Afghanistan.

The Fort Rich paratroopers are no strangers to tough assignments. A few years back, you all spent 14 months in Iraq. Now they're working to bring stability and security to eastern Afghanistan, building roads and medical clinics, renovating schools, protecting the Afghan people, giving them a chance at a better future. And they are doing a terrific job, and we salute them.

But with services comes sacrifice. All of you know this. You've made the most profound commitment a person can make: You've pledged to dedicate your life to your country, and perhaps give your life for it. Here at Elmendorf and Fort Richardson, some have.

They're airmen like Staff Sergeant Timothy Bowles, who, when a comrade fell sick, volunteered to take his place on the patrol in Afghanistan that would end up taking his life.

They're soldiers from the 4th Brigade Combat Team, like the husband and father who gave his life in Afghanistan last week, Specialist Julian Berisford.

And citizens of this State, like Alaska Native Corporal Gregory Fleury. Raised in Anchorage, he joined the Marines and served two tours in Iraq. He loved the Corps. He loved Alaska, so much so that he carried the State flag with him everywhere. It was with him last month when he was killed in those helicopter crashes in Afghanistan.

A little while ago, I had the honor of meeting Greg's family, Donna and Christopher, and his grandfather Albert. And I expressed the gratitude of our Nation, and we thank them for being with us here today. Donna, Albert, please stand.

There are no words that are strong enough and no tribute worthy enough to match the magnitude of such service. But to you and all who serve, I say this: The American people thank you. We honor you. And just as you have fulfilled your responsibilities to your Nation, your Nation will fulfill its responsibilities to you.

So as your Commander in Chief, here's the commitment I make to you: We'll make sure you can meet the missions we ask of you. And that's why we're increasing the defense budget, including spending on the Air Force and the Army. We'll make sure we have the right force structure. So we've halted reductions in the Air Force, increased the size of the Army ahead of schedule, and also approved a temporary increase in the Army.

We'll spend our defense dollars wisely. So we're cutting tens of billions of dollars in waste and projects that even the Pentagon says it doesn't need, money that's better spent on taking care of you and your families and building the 21st century military that we do need.

I want you guys to understand I will never hesitate to use force to protect the American people or our vital interests. But I also make you this promise: I will not risk your lives unless it is necessary to America's vital interests. And if it is necessary, the United States of America will have your back. We will give you the strategy and the clear mission you deserve. We will give you the equipment and support that you need to get the job done. And that includes public support back home. That is a promise that I make to you.

And as you meet your missions around the world, we will take care of your families here at home. And that's why the First Lady, Michelle, has been visiting bases across the country. Go Michelle. *[Laughter]* Your family is a priority for our family. So we're increasing pay; we're increasing child care; we're increasing support to help spouses and families deal with the stress and separation of war.

And finally, we pledge to be there when you come home. We're improving care for our wounded warriors, especially those with PTSD and traumatic brain injuries. I want to salute the outstanding work you do at the hospital here on the base, including your new TBI clinic. Thank you for giving our wounded warriors the world-class care they deserve.

We're funding the post-9/11 GI bill because we want to give your families the chance to pursue your dreams. And we're making the biggest commitment to our veterans, the largest percentage increase in the VA budget in more than 30 years.

So these are the commitments I'm making to you. Because you've always taken care of America, and America has to take care of you back. America's obligation to our military, as we saw this week, is a sacred trust that we are honorbound to uphold.

It's the sacred trust that brought a nation together this week around 13 battlefield crosses. It's the sacred trust that leads us to pause, on that November day, to give thanks for all those who served before us. It's the sacred trust that brings me here to say thank you for serving today, thank you to you and your families for all you do to protect this country we love.

God bless you, and God bless the United States of America. Thank you, everybody. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:39 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Maj. Gen. William J. Troy, USA, commander, U.S. Army Alaska; Col. Mark D. Camerer, USAF, vice commander, and Chief Master Sgt. Tom Baker, USAF, 3d Wing, Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska; Lt. Gen. Dana T. Atkins, USAF, commander, Alaskan Command; Command Chief Master Sgt. Robert Moore, USAF, 11th Air Force;; Command Sgt. Maj. David Turnbull, USA, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry; and Donna Fleury-Brown, mother, Christopher Flygare, father, and Albert Fleury, grandfather, of Cpl. Gregory M.W. Fleury, USMC, who was killed in Helman Province, Afghanistan, on Oct. 26, 2009.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Elmendorf Air Force Base, AK, remarks to military personnel and their families.

*Location:* Anchorage, Alaska.

*Names:* Atkins, Dana T.; Baker, Tom; Begich, Mark P. ; Camerer, Mark D.; Campbell, Craig E.; Fleury, Albert; Fleury-Brown, Donna; Flygare, Christopher; Moore, Robert; Obama, Michelle; Troy, William J.; Turnbull, David.

*Subjects:* Alaska : Elmendorf Air Force Base; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Alaska : Elmendorf Air Force Base ; Alaska : Elmendorf Air Force Base; Alaska : President Obama's visit; Alaska : President's visit; Armed Forces, U. S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : Expansion; Armed Forces, U.S. : Funding; Armed Forces, U.S. : GI bill legislation; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Casualties; Armed forces, U.S. : Service members :: Pay increase; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), treatment efforts; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Service and dedication; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Service and dedication ; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Traumatic brain injuries, treatment efforts; Army, Department of the : Fort Hood, shooting; Asia : President Obama's visit; Defense, Department of : Budgetary discipline; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Texas : Fort Hood, shooting; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Funding; Veterans Day; Virginia : Arlington National Cemetery.

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